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Social Studies

# The Anasazi: The Ancient Builders



by Zeke G. Ato

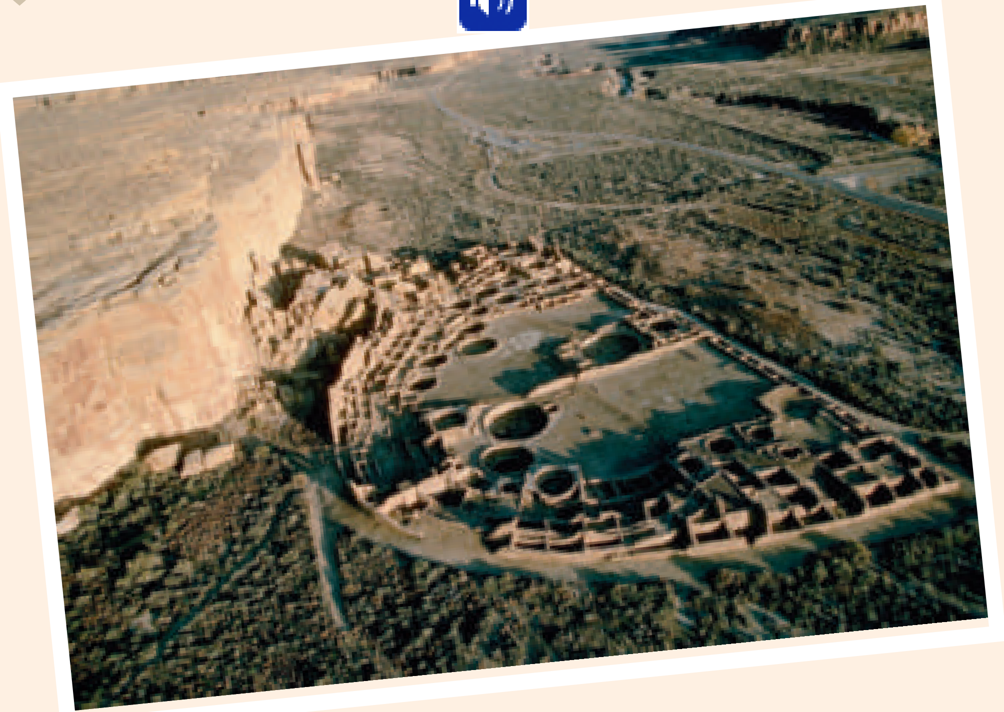
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|---|---|---|---|
| Expository Nonfiction | • Society<br>• Adapting Culture<br>• Geography | • Captions<br>• Definitions<br>• Map<br>• Fact Box | • Building and Road Words |

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by Zeke G. Ato




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*Anasazi* is the Navajo word for "Ancient Ones." The Anasazi are the ancient Pueblo people who built a civilization of houses, roads, and crops over 2,100 years ago. They lived in the area presently known as the Four Corners—the high desert where Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah meet.




## Natural Surroundings

The high desert is a land of mountains and flat hills called *mesas*. The word *mesa* means "table" in Spanish, and this land form can have a surface as flat as a table top. At the lower elevations, the area has dry grasslands. The Anasazi had to cope with snows in the mountains and strong winds on the plains. The Anasazi lived near water sources. They built roads, homes, and storage pits to store their crops. They also learned how to collect water for their crops.



**Did You Know?** **Navajo**

- ***Navajo*** is the language of the Navajo, or Diné, people.
- The Navajo are the largest group of Native Americans in the United States.

**crops:** farm plants such as grains, fruits, vegetables





## Housing

The first Anasazi made their homes in naturally formed caves they found on mountain sides. As their civilization advanced, they began to build pit structures. These were circular buildings that were dug into the ground. They built their homes with materials that were in abundance—rocks and mud. The larger pit buildings were called *kivas*. It is believed that the *kivas* were used for sacred ceremonies.





The Great Kiva at Pueblo Bonito is in the center of the plaza.



The villages grew in population, so the Anasazi began building rooms above ground. These one-story structures often had connecting rooms and faced a central court. Adobe, a mixture of sandy clay and straw, was their main building material. The Anasazi people also used wooden beams to support their structures. This building style is known as the *pueblo*, or planned town.

Some of these pueblos were located on the sides of cliffs. The buildings did not have many windows or doors, and people used ladders to get from one level to another. It is surprising to see large towers built on the side of a cliff! Two of the most famous pueblos are Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde.



Mesa Verde





This pueblo was part of the Chaco Canyon system of pueblos.



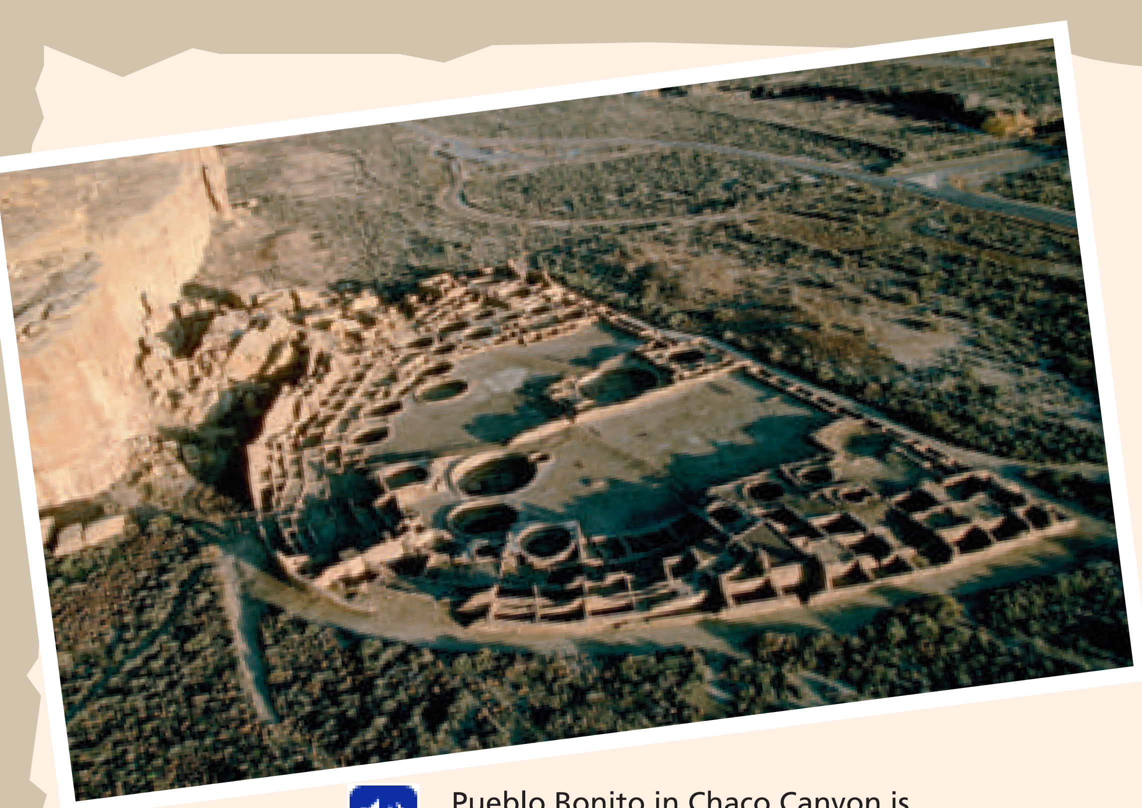
## Chaco Canyon

The people who built Chaco Canyon had to plan and work together to develop this complex system of villages and roads. They began by building several large pueblos. Then they built many smaller pueblos that surrounded the larger pueblos. The large and small pueblos were joined by a system of roads. This system made Chaco Canyon a center of activity, an area where people could come and trade. Each pueblo also had its own irrigation system. Water is scarce in the desert, and trapping water to drink and to water the crops was essential.

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**trade:** buy and sell

**irrigation:** watering





Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon is still in good condition today.



One pueblo that is in good condition today is Pueblo Bonito, which means "beautiful town" in Spanish. It gives us an idea of what the life of the Anasazi was like so many years ago. Some of the buildings are four stories high! These multiple-story houses are called "Great Houses." The sand-stone buildings had over 800 rooms and several *kivas*. Many of the rooms were used to store food, such as corn. The buildings surround a local meeting area called a *plaza*.



## Mesa Verde

*Mesa Verde* means "green table" in Spanish. The homes found at Mesa Verde were built into the alcoves of canyon walls. Many people call these buildings "cliff dwellings." The Anasazi probably built their homes in the cliffs to protect themselves from any enemies.

They built their homes with sandstone blocks and cemented them together with mud and water. Some of the cliff dwellings have apartments and large towers. Scientists believe that families lived together in the apartments, and they formed small communities. Some of the cliff dwellings have over 200 rooms!





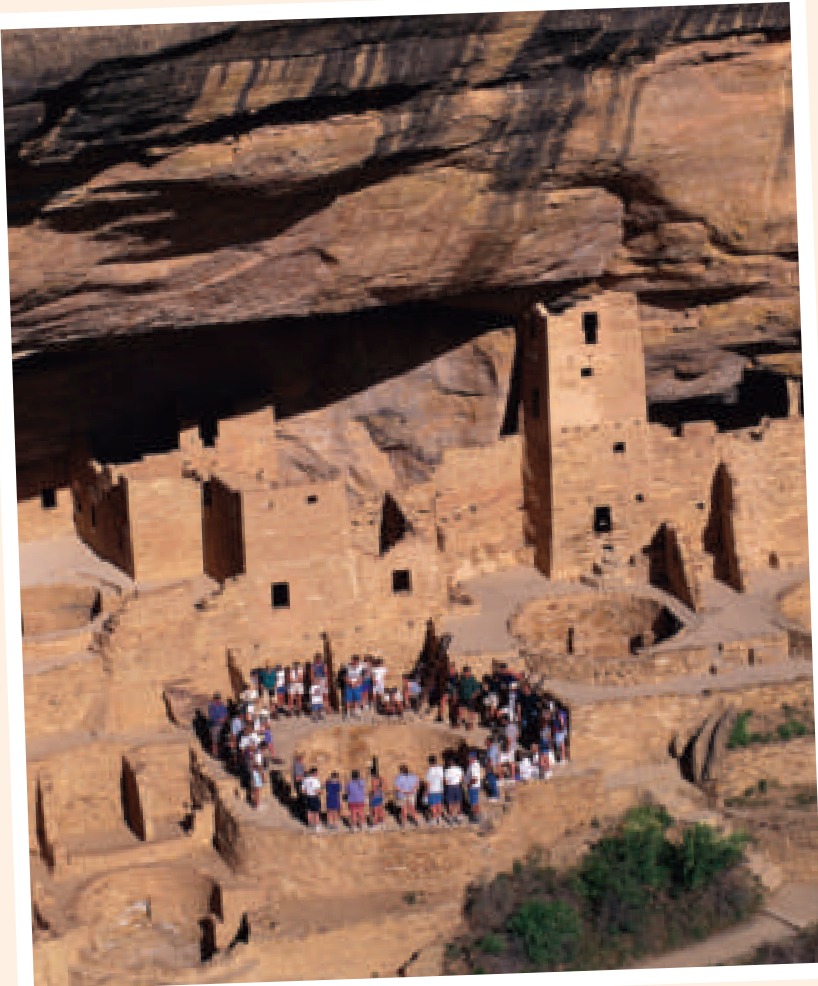
Spruce Tree House in Mesa Verde National Park was built into an alcove.

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**alcoves:** hollow areas in a cliff



By looking at what the Anasazi left behind, archeologists know that they spent most of their time in the courtyards. They made baskets, pottery, jewelry, and tools. Cooking also was done in the courtyards. Inside, the ceilings and walls in the rooms are blackened by smoke. This suggests that they used fires to stay warm in the winter.



 Many people visit Mesa Verde today.

**archeologists:** people who study the cultures of ancient people





## Crops

When the Anasazi were wanderers, they hunted animals for food and ate wild plants. As their building skills improved, so did their shelters. These improved shelters allowed them to stay in one place longer, so they began to farm. Corn, beans, and squash were their major crops.

The high desert area is not a great place to grow crops. In the mountains, the snow makes the growing season short. In the grasslands, it is hot, and there are long periods with no rain. The poor soil is not good for crops, either. If the crops failed and there was little rain, the Anasazi had to move. When they lived in Chaco Canyon, they learned to build dams and channels to collect and direct water. This allowed them to stay in one place much longer.

**wanderers:** people who move around a lot




The roads allowed each pueblo to communicate and trade with people as far away as Mexico.



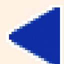
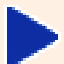
## Roads

The roads that connected the pueblos in Chaco Canyon were a great accomplishment for the Anasazi. There are about 400 miles of roads that connect about seventy-five towns. The roads are not just little foot paths. The Anasazi built them wide. Most are twenty feet wide, but there are some places where the roads are thirty feet wide! The Anasazi also built many of the roads in straight lines; they did not build around obstacles, such as hills or other natural land forms. Instead of building around a hill, the Anasazi would level the hill to keep the road going in a straight line.



Archeologists do not know for sure why these roads were built. They haven't found evidence of the use of wheels in the Anasazi culture, or of animals that could pull anything. Horses were introduced to North America after the time of the Anasazis.

To build the roads, the Anasazi dug into rocky soil until they hit the bedrock. This kept the road level. They also built rock walls in certain areas to make sure the roads did not get destroyed during a heavy rain. When the road passed over a rocky mesa, they used boulders or big rocks to line the road.




The pueblo-style house that the Anasazi introduced is still built today.


The Anasazi survived about 1,400 years before disappearing. It is not clear what happened to them. They were always on the move due to drought and enemy attacks. Archeologists think that a long-lasting drought and poor soil may have caused their disappearance. Archeologists believe they moved south, to Arizona and lands near the Rio Grande. If this is true, then the present day Pueblo, Zuni, and Hopi Native Americans may be their descendants.

Although we do not know for sure what happened to the Anasazi, they adapted to their surroundings and left us a wonderful gift. These ancient builders left us their architecture—their buildings, their building methods, and their roads. Their structures have inspired many builders throughout the centuries.

**drought:** long period with no rain







## Talk About It

1. What difficulties did the Anasazi have to tolerate in order to survive?
2. What does the Anasazi's architecture tell you about how they adapted to their surroundings?

## Write About It

3. Make a chart like the one below on a separate paper. In the chart, describe how the Anasazi houses, roads, and farming methods worked well in the desert.

| | Describe | Tell Why It Works Well |
|---|---|---|
| Kinds of Buildings | | |
| Roads | | |
| Farming Methods | | |

## Extend Language

The Anasazi built things called *pueblos, kivas,* and *roads.* What are some words for kinds of buildings and roads in modern cities?

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